GNOSTIC ORIGINS

BY

R. McL. WILSON

In a recent contribution (V.C. viii. 220) R. A. Markus criticised in passing the view maintained by F. C. Burkitt, that Valentinus and his fellows were fundamentally Christians. According to Markus, "The great Christian Gnostics now appear in a much clearer light as men who attempted to christianise radically Greek and Oriental religion, rather than, as used to be fashionable to hold, doing the reverse". In a footnote he adds: "As late as 1932 Burkitt wrote: 'The various forms of gnosticism are attempts to formulate and express the ordinary Christianity in terms and categories which suited the science and philosophy of the day'";[1] and further, that "Burkitt's view that gnosticism was an essentially Christian heresy was endorsed by Casey as 'undoubtedly right'".[2]

It may however be questioned if this is altogether fair to Burkitt, or to Casey, and a fresh examination of the writings in question only serves to confirm the doubt. To summarise in a single sentence the argument of a book, or even of an article, is almost inevitably to distort it, since it is wellnigh impossible to convey the author's full position. Burkitt did quite frankly uphold the old-fashioned view, but he did so for a purpose, and within certain limits.[3] Moreover his vindication of the essential Christianity of Valentinus is accepted as convincing by C. H. Dodd.[4] Again, the comment made by Markus does not do justice to Casey's careful and balanced survey of the Gnostic problem. It may be added that criticism of

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[1] Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis* 58 (not 48, as Markus).

[2] *J.T.S.* XXXVI (1938), 58.

[3] Cf. op. cit. 9: "If I take the other side it is not only because I think the several systems are best understood as Christian systems, however aberrant, but because I wish above all to point out that the dominant cause, the moving factor which led to the excogitation of these systems, was something inherent in Christianity and the beliefs of the earliest Christians."

[4] *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* 100 n. 4; cf. *The Bible and the Greeks* 207 n. 1.

this single point of detail in an article extending over thirty pages is by no means a disparagement of Markus' contribution as a whole.

It has been said with truth that "The rise and spread of Gnosticism forms one of the dimmest chapters in Church history",[5] and the character and origins of the movement have been much debated. The traditional theory saw in Gnosticism a "Christian deviation", but already in 1909 Robert Law could write "One fact is clear, Gnosticism was not, in the proper sense, a 'heresy'. Although it became a corrupting influence within the Church, it was an alien by birth".[6] Gnosticism is the "result of an irruption of Oriental religious beliefs into the Graeco-Roman world", and consequently "sought to unite in itself two diverse strains, Western intellectualism and Eastern mysticism". The point at issue then was simply which of these two strains was to be regarded as the stock on which the other was grafted. On the one hand, certain scholars tended to glorify Gnosticism by giving the chief prominence to its philosophical aspect. "The great Gnostics were the first Christian philosophers; and Gnosticism is to be regarded as, upon the whole, a progressive force." To other writers, however, "by much the prepotent strain in this singular hybrid was Oriental Dualism . . . It is far truer to call Gnosticism a reactionary than a progressive force, and its most eminent leaders the last upholders of a lost cause, rather than the advance-guard of intellectual progress."

Casey's review of the subject is slightly different: the prevailing view "from Irenaeus to Harnack", that "the essence of Gnosticism lay in the too drastic application of Greek philosophy to Christianity", is criticised as at once too narrow and too elastic.[7] On the other hand, the view that Gnosticism is essentially Oriental "has to meet the difficulty that there is no evidence that the mythologies of Babylonia, Persia and Egypt underwent such a transformation

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[5] Law, *The Tests of Life* (Edinburgh 1909) 26f., from which the substance of this paragraph is drawn.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Op. cit. 56: Too elastic, because it applies almost equally to Clement and Origen; too narrow, because it misses the essential characteristics not only of Marcion but also of Simon Magus and many of the Ophites. On this "classical" view of heresy, cf. Turner: The Pattern of Christian Truth (London, 1954) 217ff.

as would have been necessary to bring them into line with Gnosticism". In spite, of "some amalgamation in the Hellenistic melting-pot", the Oriental cults still bear unmistakable traces of their origins, in sharp contrast to the Gnostic theories. In point of fact, "all attempts to define Gnosticism have darkened counsel by emphasizing some one aspect of particular systems at the expense of the wide variety of interests and speculations and fancies found in the evidence".[8]

It is at this point that Casey "endorses" the view of Burkitt: "Professor Burkitt is undoubtedly right in saying that 'the several (Gnostic) systems are best understood when considered as Christian systems, however aberrant'". Burkitt as a matter of fact was writing primarily of the Gnostics who are known to us from the works of Irenaeus and Hippolytus: "The Gnostics come before us historically as Christians".[9] The first condition of rightly regarding such teachers as Valentinus and Basilides is "to consider them as Christians who were striving to set forth the living essence of their Religion in a form uncontaminated by the Jewish envelope in which they had received it, and expressed in terms more suited (as they might say) to the cosmogony and philosophy of their enlightened age".[10] On the other hand, Burkitt also says "the theology of the higher Paganism had become so enlightened that it is an open question whether the theological ideas of the Hermetic writings are, or are not, independent of Christian ideas".[11]

It may be that part at least of the problem is a question of definition. As Casey says, "Gnosticism is a modern, not an ancient category", and "its use has frequently obscured more than it has illuminated the picture of early Christianity".[12] But behind it he sees a definite historical reality: "a group of theologians and sects characterised (*a*) by their obligations to Christianity, (*b*) by the autonomous quality of their systems which made them rivals of orthodox Christianity rather than modifiers of it in points of detail, and (*c*) by a demand for theological novelty which their

[8] Ibid. 58.
[9] *Church and Gnosis*, 9.
[10] Ibid. 27f.
[11] Ibid. 124.
[12] Op. cit. 60.

frequent appeals to a remote antiquity have obscured but not concealed".

As Dodd has pointed out, "there is a sense in which orthodox Christian theologians like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, on the one hand, and Hellenistic Jews like Philo, and pagan writers like the Hermetists, on the other, should be called Gnostics".[13] Among British scholars, on the other hand, the term has commonly been used in a more restricted sense, in Dodd's words "as a label for a large and somewhat amorphous group of religious systems described by Irenaeus and Hippolytus in their works against Heresy, and similar systems known from other sources".[14]

It will be immediately apparent that Burkitt and Casey have both employed the word in the narrower sense. It will be apparent also that the scope for misunderstanding and confusion is considerable, if this distinction is not kept in mind. There is in fact a real need for a greater clarity and precision in the use of the term, and it would seem therefore advisable to divide the field. In a general way, three stages can be distinguished. We have on the one hand the precursors of Gnosticism (in the narrower sense) in Philo and, it would seem, in Jewish groups of a more or less heterodox character, including possibly the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls.[15] At the other extreme we have such systems as Manicheism and Mandeism, in which "Gnostic" influences seem definitely to be present but which are probably to be regarded as more or less distinct. Between these two extremes we have the Gnosticism opposed by Irenaeus and Hippolytus, which came into full flourish in the second century A.D., and also the pagan "Gnosticism" of the Hermetica. [16] Accord-

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[13] *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* 97.

[14] Ibid. Neither of the modern senses corresponds exactly to ancient usage (cf. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* 3f.).

[15] Cf. Schoeps, Das gnostische Judentum in den Dead Sea Scrolls, in *ZRGG* VI (1954), 276ff. Bo Reicke however in *N.T. Studies* 1. 137ff. warns against the temptation to seek for an elaborate Gnosticism in these scrolls.

[16] It should be noted (*a*) that the Hermetic documents as we know them belong to the Christian era, i.e. they are not older but at most contemporary with the Christian Gnostic systems (Quispel op. cit. 9f.); (*b*) that not all the Hermetic tractates are truly "Gnostic" (ib. 28f.). Cf. van Moorsel, The Mysteries of Hermes Trismegistus (Utrecht 1955) 20ff., who suggests that a term like *semi-Gnosticism* would be more satisfactory.

ing to Nock, the latter "offrent de frappantes ressemblances avec maints écrits du gnosticisme chrétien", but he adds "Ce phénomène paraît dû, non pas à un emprunt direct, mais au fait qu'ils dépendent ensemble d'un même fonds intellectuel et répondent à des besoins analogues de la sensibilité de l'époque".[17] In other words both, to say the least, have a common background in the characteristic syncretism of the Hellenistic world.

At this point reference may be made to certain questions which seem to demand attention. One of them is clearly posed in Quispel's epigrammatic statement "Dass die Gnosis im Wesen und Ursprung *nicht*christlich ist, wird immer klarer; ob sie aber auch *vor*christlich ist, muss noch bewiesen werden";[18] but in addition to the question clearly posed, two others at least are latent. An examination of these questions may serve to clear the ground, and prepare the way for advance.

In the first place, in what sense is Gnosticism to be considered un-Christian? From what has been said above it will be obvious that approach to the problems of Gnosticism in the last-half century or more has followed two main lines. As Dodd puts it: "On the one hand, the typical Gnostic systems are regarded as varying attempts, on the part of people who in intention at least accepted fundamental Christian beliefs, to expand, supplement and reinterpret those beliefs in terms acceptable to the thinking religious public of the time. On the other hand, Gnosticism is regarded as a religious movement older than Christianity, and originally independent of it, which, being from the outset syncretistic in character, readily adopted Christian ideas into its systems as those beliefs became known to the wider public".[19]

These two main lines of approach are commonly associated respectively with the narrower and the wider definition of the terms Gnostic and Gnosticism, but it may be asked if the two points of view are of necessity mutually exclusive. To quote Dodd again, "If we ask, Did the Gnostics consider themselves Christians? the answer would seem to be that some did and some did not".[20]

[17] *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. A. D. Nock and A. J. Festugière, I p. vii.
[18] *Gnosis als Weltreligion* 5.
[19] *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* 97f. Cf. Quispel op. cit. 47.
[20] Ibid.

In other words the solution lies not in a choice between alternatives but in the recognition that there is truth on both sides. Historically the Gnostics come before us as Christian heretics, but in point of fact features of a "Gnostic" type are to be found beyond the limits of purely Christian Gnosticism, and such other systems must also be taken into consideration so far as they are relevant. The problem is: are these features evidence for the existence of a pagan Gnosticism, or merely for certain aspects of Hellenistic thought which Gnosticism has adopted, and possibly overstressed?

On the other hand, it would seem to be clear that we can no longer speak in general terms of "Gnosticism", since there is no single formula which will adequately cover all the Gnostic systems. There is indeed a certain common element, a common background, and there are certain common ideas, but it is doubtful if we are justified in using such comprehensive definitions as "the acute Hellenisation of Christianity" or "the radical Christianisation of Greek and Oriental religion". We shall have to consider particular systems, for which these definitions may be valid. To apply them to "Gnosticism" as a whole is to cloud the issue.

At the same time, Quispel's statement is certainly valid, at least to this extent, that Gnosticism is fundamentally un-Christian. The truth of this statement becomes immediately apparent when we consider the various systems, for whether we regard these teachers as Christians who sought to accommodate their faith to Hellenistic thought, or as pagans who sought to assimilate Christianity into a pagan system of belief, the final outcome is certainly not the faith once delivered to the saints.

The second question is much more difficult, and indeed it may be impossible to reach a solution. It may be readily admitted that Gnosticism is un-Christian *im Wesen*, but is it also so *im Ursprung?* As Markus observes, the discovery of the Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in 1945 has made it clear that the movement with which we are dealing was something much wider than a Christian heresy.[21] Professor Quispel has written of Gnosticism as a world-religion, as a broad stream flowing through late antiquity side by side

[21] *V.C.* VIII. 193. For the Library of Nag Hammadi see now *The Jung Codex* (ed. F. L. Cross: London 1955).

with Greek philosophy and with Christianity.[22] But are we justified in thinking, at least in the early stages, of anything so definite as a religion? There would seem to be something in favour of H. R. Mackintosh's comment: "an atmosphere, rather than a system".[23] To be more specific, it may be suggested that Gnosticism is possibly to be regarded as a trend in Hellenistic syncretism. The Gnostic systems, in the narrower sense of the term, are the product of a fusion, whether by Christians or by pagans, of Christianity and Hellenistic thought. They represent in one form or another a re-interpretation of Christianity in terms of contemporary ideas. The general background is very much the same as that of Philo and the Hermetica, with whom these systems have many things in common. But the very variety of the Gnostic systems must surely give rise to doubt as to the existence before the coming of Christianity of anything we may truly call a movement. What is certain is that when Christianity made its appearance in the Graeco-Roman world it very soon came into contact with what has been called "the higher paganism".[24]

Duncan rejects as "a gratuitous assumption" the view that in writing to the Galatians Paul had to contend with opponents of a Gnostic type.[25] The First Epistle to the Corinthians, however, "does reveal into how congenial a soil the seeds of Gnosticism were about to fall".[26] In Colossians and the Pastorals there are indications that attempts at assimilation had been made which were such as to constitute a danger to the Christian faith, while the Fourth Gospel and the First Epistle of John have a more definitely Gnostic teaching in view.[27] At the beginning of the second century Ignatius finds it necessary to combat teaching of a Docetic tendency,[28] but it is only later in the century that the "heresy" reaches its height. By the time of Irenaeus certainly Gnosticism had developed into a movement. Able and influential Gnostic

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[22] *Gnosis als Weltreligion* 16ff., esp. 26; Cf. *The Jung Codex* 78.
[23] *The Person of Jesus Christ* 134.
[24] Cf. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (Moffatt Commentary), XVIIff.
[25] *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Moffatt Commentary), *XXXIII* f.
[26] Law, *The Tests of Life*, 28.
[27] Law, loc. cit. Cf. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* XVII f.
[28] Cf. most recently Molland in *JEH V* (1945) 1ff.

leaders had gathered groups of disciples, who propagated and sometimes modified the teachings of their master. But are we justified in reading back the situation of the second century into the first, and speaking of a Gnostic movement independent of and prior to Christianity?

Approaching the question from another angle, we find an incipient Gnosticism in Asia Minor in the Epistle to the Colossians and in the Book of the Revelation.[29] In Syria we have Simon Magus and others, while in Palestine it may be that we shall have to include the Essenes.[30] The chief centre from which Gnostic theories came appears however to be Egypt, which would seem also to be the region in which the movement enjoyed its longest lease of life. Once again, are we to think of a single movement which began in one locality and thence spread to the others, or of a number of similar but possibly unrelated outbreaks?

The difficulty here arises from the nature of our sources, which are not sufficient to allow us to construct a genealogy of the Gnostic sects. We know something of the modifications in the Valentinian system made by the two branches into which that school was later divided, and it may be that the Nag Hammadi documents will provide the material for a study of the development of the Gnostic literature in another sect.[31] It is of interest that Valentinian writings, and also some Hermetica, are included in the library of a Sethian group,[32] but we are not yet in a position to trace the relationships between the different groups. In this connection the early publication of all the new material is an urgent need.

We have already touched upon the question directly posed by Quispel, which indeed is closely bound up with the question we have been discussing. If no evidence can be found for a Gnostic movement independent of Christianity, then clearly the question of a pre-Christian Gnosticism does not arise. Here it is important that we should be careful in defining our terms, and that we should

[29] E.g. Rev. 2. 6, 16; cf. Iren. 1. 23, 3.11.7 (Harvey).

[30] Cf. note 15 above.

[31] Cf. Doresse in *V.C.* II, 137ff. Also Till in *La Parola del Passato* 1949, 230ff.

[32] *The Jung Codex* 25ff.

distinguish what is specifically Gnostic from what is merely common Hellenistic theory. Again, it is possible to trace the ultimate sources of particular Gnostic ideas in the religions of Egypt and Babylonia and Persia, but we are not here concerned with roots so far back. What is distinctive of Gnosticism is a certain *combination* of these elements, and the primary task must be to trace this combination to its source.

Here also everything points to the characteristic syncretism of the Hellenistic Age. The evidence of the New Testament justifies the provisional dating of the origins of Christian Gnosticism in the middle of the first century, in the contact of Christianity with "the higher paganism". The failure of eschatology to which Burkitt draws attention may have been a contributory factor. As Knox says, "Paul was faced with the necessity of reconstructing the Gospel, if he was to appeal to the intellect of the Gentile world".[33] The same may fairly be said of the Church as a whole, so far as it was concerned to meet the needs of the contemporary world. But whether we can penetrate further back, and trace the existence of an independent movement, remains to be seen.

Friedländer at the end of last century endeavoured to prove the existence of a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism, but his theory did not meet with general acceptance.[34] Some thirty years later Thomas traced the history of the Palestinian Baptist sects from the beginning as far as Mandeism.[35] Here there are definite traces of a "Gnostic" type of thought, but it may be questioned if these are sufficient to prove the existence of a movement independent of and prior to Christianity. More recently the whole question has been reopened by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The sect to whom these scrolls belonged is generally identified with the Essenes, although this identification is disputed by Schoeps and others.[36]

[33] *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles*, 26.

[34] *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (Göttingen 1898). This was an attempt to substantiate the thesis of an earlier book adversely reviewed by Schürer. See TLZ 1899, 167f.

[35] *Le mouvement Baptiste en Palestine et Syrie* (1935).

[36] See Rowley, *The Zadokite Fragments and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, and literature referred to there. See also Dupont-Sommer, *The Jewish Sect of Qumran and the Essenes*, and on the other side Schoeps in *ZRGG* VI. (1954) 279. The issue would seem to be quite conclusively settled by the similarity

More important for present purposes is the fact that Schoeps now claims the existence of a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism.[37] "Die Dogmatisierung des Mythos vom descensus angelorum in Genesis 6, durch den nach ebionitischer Auslegung die Dämonen und der Fürst der Finsternis von Gott zur Machtausübung zugelassen wurden, ist der Ursprung der jüdischen Gnosis, die von den Dead Sea Scrolls bis zum Sohar reicht."[38] "Die Gemeinde, die uns in den Rollen vom Toten Meer und in der Damaskus-schrift entgegentritt, die Essäer von Philo und Josephus, die Ossäer des Epiphanius, die Johannesjünger und die Ebioniten als die Nachkommen der Jerusalemer Urgemeinde sind sämtlich, als sie über den Jordan gingen, zu Repräsentanten eines apokalyptisch-gnostischen Judentum geworden".[39]

The possibility of some relationship between Gnosticism and the Dead Sea Scrolls will certainly require investigation,[40] but this

between the rite of admission contained in the Manual of Discipline and the Essene ceremony described by Josephus (Dupont-Sommer op. cit. 92). Cf. also Braun in *Rev. Biblique* 1955, 10, Coppens in *La Nouvelle Clio* 1954, 253.

[37] Op. cit. 277: "Das bisher wichtigste Ergebnis ist für mich, dass die in meinen beiden Büchern "Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums" (Tübingen 1949) und "Aus früh-christlicher Zeit" (ebd. 1950) für problematisch und unwahrscheinlich erklärte Grösse "gnostisches Judentum in vorchristlicher Zeit" tatsächlich existiert hat". Reicke (N.T.S. 1. 137ff.) is more restrained: "It seems possible to regard the Qumran texts as evidence for a gradual development of Jewish Apocalyptic to more philosophical theories such as the Judaistic Gnosticism or 'philosophy' alluded to in Col. ii. 8, or the philosophy of Philo", but "there is still some way to go until one has arrived at the ontological mysticism of Philo, or the semi-philosophical speculations of Jewish and Christian Gnosticism". In view of this, Reicke's statement that "the existence of a pre-Christian Jewish and Jewish-Hellenistic Gnosticism . . . seems to be confirmed by the pre-Gnosticism of the scrolls" may perhaps be questioned. It is a possibility only. The description "pre-Gnosticism", which Reicke offers with some hesitation, seems to express the truth quite admirably.

[38] Ibid. 278.

[39] Ibid. 279.

[40] Cf. Quispel, in *The Jung Codex*, 38: "We must inquire: Does there exist any connexion between Jewish heterodoxy as it finds expression e.g. in the 'Essene' documents from the Dead Sea, heretical Gnosis which flows in the ancient world as a broad river at the side of Greek philosophy and orthodox Christianity, and the 'true', that is the orthodox, Gnosis of the Alexandrians?"

question cannot be considered fully here. Certain considerations however may be mentioned: in the first place, Schoeps seems right in rejecting any suggestion of Iranian influence.[41] The *ultimate* source of certain elements may be Iranian, but as already observed we are looking for a particular combination of ideas. In this case the intermediary was Judaism, and a Judaism which had made the borrowed elements characteristically its own. On the other hand it must be asked if we have to do with a specifically Jewish *Gnosticism*, or with certain Jewish ideas which the Gnostics later adopted. The myth of the *descensus angelorum* admittedly appears in the Gnostic systems. An allegorical interpretation of it is found in Philo, and it is employed in Jewish apocalyptic writings.[42] That the Gnostics derived the myth from Judaism in some way or other is certain; that it was already employed in a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism is not so clear. It is sometimes difficult to draw a sharp line between apocalyptic and Gnosticism, but the effort must be made. A sufficient explanation may well be that apocalyptic and "gnostic" Judaism, like the type of thinking represented by Philo, is to be regarded as another of the precursors of Gnosticism.[43] In other words, we have to distinguish between a type of thought which is definitely Gnostic and one which is similar to Gnosticism but not to be identified with it. This of course raises again the problem of definition: what essentially *is* Gnosticism? Simply as a matter of practical convenience, it would seem advisable to restrict the field as far as possible. The similarities which may be found outside our limits may be recognised, they may prove of service in our study, but we must always ask "Is this Gnosticism, or merely something like it?" It is well known that some of the early Fathers use language and forms of expression which in a later age would have rendered them liable to a charge

[41] Op. cit. 278 and note 8.

[42] Cf. Moore, *Judaism* I. 406, 483; 2. 315, and for Philo, Drummond, *Philo Judaeus* 1. 338, 2. 240.

[43] In a private letter Prof. Quispel, speaking of the "marginal Judaism" of the "Essenes", observes "This is not Gnosis, only pre-Gnosis". Cf. Reicke loc. cit., who says "The new scrolls facilitate the assumption that the evolution of Jewish and Christian Gnosticism was also an internal process. They contribute to filling up the gap between Jewish apocalyptic and Gnosticism".

of heresy. If an early Father is rightly not to be branded as an Arian for employing "Arian" terminology long before Arianism was ever heard of, so also, it may be suggested, Philo and others are not properly to be called Gnostics.[44] Admittedly we can trace in their writings the seeds of later theories, but the seed is not the plant. Otherwise Heraclitus and the Stoics would have to be called Christians because of the later development of the Logos doctrine!

In the light of what has already been said it will be clear that the existence of a pre-Christian Gnostic movement remains a possibility, but in the present state of our knowledge it is no more than a possibility. It is indeed probable that the evidence advanced in favour of a pre-Christian Gnosticism should be regarded rather as evidence of a "pre-Gnosis". What is certain is that Gnosticism as we know it is primarily the result of the contact of Christianity with the Hellenistic world. It is reported that in some of the documents from Nag Hammadi the Christian element is very slight,[45] and indeed it would appear that at least in one case we have evidence of a Christianising redaction of an older pagan work.[46] "Der Forscher hat den Eindruck", says Quispel, "dass dies auch bei andern Schriften immer wieder der Fall gewesen ist, dass Offenbarungen, die ursprünglich dem Grossen Seth oder einem andern Offenbarungsträger angehörten, Christus in den Mund gelegt werden".[47] This, as Quispel claims, would be of immense importance, as proving that Gnosticism was not Christian but pagan in origin. "Es ist aber vorschnell, ohne gründliche Kenntnis des ganzen Materials solche folgenschwere Folgerungen zu ziehen . . . Es muss dabei bleiben, dass die Leute, denen diese

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[44] Reference may also be made to the case of Origen, who "received the posthumous honour of being made a heretic by Jerome and Justinian — men of large attainments but unamiable minds — because some of his speculations, suggested in all intellectual humility and with touching loyalty to the tradition of the Church, turned out on subsequent examination to be untenable". (Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics* (London 1940) 91).

[45] Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* 5; Doresse in *V.C.* II. 159 ("Eugnoste ignore ou évite tout emprunt réel à l'Ancien Testament ou au christianisme").

[46] Cf. Doresse in *V.C.* II. 137ff., Quispel loc. cit. See also Till's study of the development in the Coptic texts already known before the Nag Hammadi discovery, in *La Parola del Passato* 1949, 230ff.

[47] Loc. cit.

Schriften gehörten, sich mehr oder weniger als Christen gebärden und vorläufig als christliche Häretiker betrachtet werden müssen".[48] Moreover, if Gnosticism were thus proved un-Christian in origin, it would remain to be shown that it was also pre-Christian.

Dodd has set out three "more or less certain facts":[49] first, there is no Gnostic document known to us which can with any show of probability be dated before the period of the New Testament. Secondly, the typical Gnostic systems all combine in various ways and proportions ideas derived from Christianity with ideas which can be shown to be derived from, or at least to have affinities with, other religious or philosophical traditions. And thirdly, the various Gnostic systems differ widely in the way in which they introduce and combine these disparate elements.

These three facts sum up our present knowledge, although the second, as has been indicated, may require some modification should proof of a pagan Gnosticism be forthcoming from the Nag Hammadi texts. At the moment we can trace Gnosticism back to what Casey called "the Hellenistic melting-pot", but further back we cannot go. Attempts to recover earlier sources are so far entirely speculative. But we can ask if there is any particular community in the Hellenistic world which may have made a special contribution to the development of Gnosticism.

"As compared with the Hermetica", says Dodd, "and even with Philo, the Gnostic systems are generally speaking less Hellenic, more oriental, and certainly much more addicted to mythology".[50] This verdict is confirmed by Walter Till's comparison of the Coptic texts which were known before the Nag Hammadi discovery.[51] Till finds it possible to arrange these documents chronologically, and so to trace the development of doctrine in the school in question. "Ursprünglich war die gnostische Weltanschauung auf philosophischer Grundlage aufgebaut. Sie sollte die Fragen beantworten, wie die Welt entstand, wie trotz Gottes Güte das Böse in die Welt kam, und wie sich der Mensch davon befreien kann". A later generation however was not concerned with these basic

[48] Ibid.

[49] *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* 98.

[50] Loc. cit.

[51] *La Parola del Passato* 1949, 230ff.

questions. "Wenn man aber die Darstellung der Entfaltung des Alls nicht mehr als Beantwortung der grossen Grundfragen ansah, mussten sie als Phantasiegebilde erscheinen. Die Phantasie bemächtigte sich daher immer mehr des Weltbildes und trieb, von keiner Fessel gehemmt, allmählich in verwirrender Fülle die wunderlichsten Blüten".[52]

It would seem that this fairly represents the "decadence" of the Gnostic sects, a process which set in within a century of the time of Valentinus. But Quispel raises the question of the relation of Valentinus and Basilides to the "vulgar" Gnosticism represented by these Coptic texts. In particular, did the two great Gnostics know such writings as the *Aprocyphon Johannis*, which Till considers the earliest of the group?[53] This question Quispel answers in the affirmative: "Valentin und Basilides haben die schon bestehende vulgäre ägyptische Gnosis hellenisiert und christianisiert". If this is correct, it becomes possible to conceive of Gnosticism as "ein grosser Strom, der von der vulgären Urgnosis zum Manichäismus führt; Valentin, Basilides, gewissermassen auch Marcion, sind Abzweigungen des grossen Stromes, die christliches Gebiet durchqueren. An sich aber ist die Gnosis eine Religion für sich . . . Eine Weltreligion ist neuentdeckt".[54]

A final judgment must await the publication and study of the new material, but this statement of the significance of the discovery at Nag Hammadi seems to raise a number of questions. It may be true of the development of Gnosticism in Egypt, but does it account for the *origin* of Gnosticism? If it can be proved that Valentinus is indebted to the *Apocryphon Johannis*, can we penetrate behind the *Apocryphon* itself? Such a theory, again, may take account of Philo, but what of the similar phenomena in other regions? And yet again, what date is to be assigned to the *Apocryphon Johannis*, if this is indeed the primary source?

It is not necessary, with Widengren,[55] to demand that Iranian, mediaeval and Islamic Gnosticism be taken into consideration. These belong to the later stages of the movement, not to its origins.

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[52] Ibid. 245.

[53] *Gnosis als Weltreligion* 11f.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Review of Quispel's book in *ZRGG* VI (1954) 166ff.

In reply to Widengren's criticisms, Quispel re-iterates his view that certain of the Nag Hammadi texts, especially the Codex Jung and possibly also the *Apocryphon Johannis*, represent a very early form of Christian Gnosticism.[56] In particular, he believes that the *Gospel of Truth* in the Codex Jung can be dated between 135 and 145 A.D.[57] In this he may well be right, and in that case the *Apocryphon Johannis* may have to be dated about the end of the first century; but we should still be a long way from a clear and convincing demonstration of the existence of a pre-Christian Gnosticism. An Iranian or Mesopotamian derivation of Gnosticism Quispel rightly rejects, since he would find the origins of Gnosticism in "die vorchristliche jüdische Religionsgeschichte".[58] Not only Persia, but all the countries which came under the sway of Alexander the Great contributed in some form to the Graeco-Roman syncretism.[59] The occurrence of Semitic names and titles in the new documents compels the assumption that the Sethian Gnosis arose not in Egypt, but somewhere in the Near East.[60] It has indeed been suggested that Christianity first entered Egypt in the form of Gnosticism.[61] However that may be, Quispel is certainly right in saying "So hat dann angeblich beinahe der ganze Vorderorient zu den Ahnen des Gnostizismus gehört".[62]

It was for this reason that the suggestion was made above that Gnosticism is to be regarded as a trend, indeed a major trend, of

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[56] *ZRGG* VI (1954) 168.

[57] Cf. van Unnik, in *The Jung Codex* 104: "*The Gospel of Truth*, which has been recovered in the Jung Codex, was written by Valentinus at Rome round about 140–145, before the development of the typically Gnostic dogmas". The last clause, it should be mentioned, refers to "the absence from this treatise of the typical elements of *Valentinian Gnosis in its classical elaboration*" (ibid. 101; italics mine).

[58] Loc. cit. See further "Christliche Gnosis und Jüdische Heterodoxie" in Evang. Theologie 1954. Cf. also *ZRGG* VI (1954) 302ff., and *Eranos Jahrbuch* XXII (Zürich 1954) 195ff.

[59] Cf. *Gnosis als Weltreligion* 7.

[60] Ibid. There may be more truth than is sometimes allowed in the tradition which made Simon Magus "the father of all heresies" (cf. ibid. 51ff.)

[61] Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit u. Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, 49ff. Lietzmann, *Gesch. der alten Kirche* II. 283 (quoted by Till op. cit. 230 n.l.).

[62] Op. cit. 9.

Hellenistic syncretism.[63] That we have to deal with something much wider than a Christian heresy is plainly evident, but that prior to the impact of Christianity upon the Hellenistic world there existed a regular Gnostic movement has not yet been conclusively shown. It is indeed possible, but as yet our available resources take us back only thus far and no further. The presence in pre-Christian times of elements which were later to be incorporated in the Gnostic theories is not in question, but it would seem more appropriate to classify these elements as pre-Gnostic, rather than as Gnostic in the proper sense.

No single tradition yet known to us is adequate to account for all the phenomena. In its origins Gnosticism is not Egyptian, nor is it Persian, nor is it Greek, although there are points of contact to be found in every case. The basic philosophy which underlies the Gnostic systems, for example, is that synthesis of Platonism and Stoicism, usually associated with the name of Posidonius, which formed the common background of contemporary thought. But a philosopher like Plotinus, in the more truly Greek tradition, found it necessary, despite the affinities of Neo-Platonism and Gnostic thought, to write a polemic against the Gnostics. Again, although Gnosticism in the narrower sense appears historically as a Christian heresy, it is fundamentally un-Christian. The refutations of its Christian opponents are sufficient proof of that. In its fully developed form the movement was for a period a menace to Christianity. Of the apocryphal gospels recently discovered Quispel says "Die Schriften atmen einen anderen Geist als die Bücher des Neuen Testaments, sie gehören trotz christliche Formeln einer andern Religion an".[64]

The line of division between the modern theories is in reality

[63] How much of the alleged pagan Gnosticism is simply commonplace Hellenistic theory? This question does not yet seem to have been sufficiently examined, but it appears to offer the key to the resolution of modern differences of opinion on Gnostic origins. If Gnosticism in the wider sense is a development in the Christian era of Hellenistic syncretism, Christian Gnosticism is the result of the impact of Christianity upon the Hellenistic world. So also the earlier Jewish Gnosticism, if it existed, resulted from the convergence of Jewish and Hellenistic thought. This certainly seems to fit the facts.

[64] Ibid. 6.

very narrow. It concerns in the long run the single question, whether or not there was before the rise of Christianity a movement which is truly to be called Gnostic. It may be that Friedländer half a century ago was right. Certainly it is significant that Quispel and Schoeps both speak of a pre-Christian *Jewish* Gnosticism, and the suggestion certainly has much to commend it. For one thing, Palestine is a strategic centre for the development and propagation of such a movement, standing as it does on the bridge between Asia and Egypt. For another, the Jews had been subject in turn to the dominance of various alien cultures, from which they demonstrably borrowed. And again, Quispel seems to have shown conclusively that the Gnostic Anthropos-concept goes back to more or less heterodox Jewish speculations concerning Adam.[65] On the other hand, Burkitt offered a very timely warning against the assumption that the occurrence of Hebrew names is proof of Jewish influence. As in the case of the name Sabaoth, it may be that we have evidence only of the use of the Greek Old Testament by a pagan who knew little or nothing of the Jewish faith.[66] So also Reitzenstein observes, with reference to the use of Jewish names and formulae in magic: "Sie zeigen nicht die Bekanntschaft mit jüdischer oder christlicher Religion, sondern die Kenntnislosigkeit".[67]

The character of the Judaism of the Hellenistic age is itself a debated question. On the one hand it is claimed that there is no evidence for any widespread syncretism among the Jews, while on the other emphasis is laid upon the many points of contact between Judaism and other systems of belief. Here two things must be borne in mind: we must ask, in the first place, not only whether the Jews took over elements from the cultures of other peoples, but also what use was made of the elements thus adopted. It is fairly clear that in Judaism there was none of the wholesale syncretism characteristic of the Oriental religions, and that the ideas adopted were pressed into the service of the Jewish faith. This is most evident in Philo, who for all his Greek culture and philosophy is quite certainly intent on making Judaism "intellectu-

[65] *Eranos Jahrbuch* XXII, 195ff.

[66] *Church and Gnosis* 36f.

[67] *Poimandres* 14. n.l.

ally respectable" in the eyes of the contemporary world.[68] And secondly, we must investigate not only pagan influence upon the Jews but also the influence exercised by Judaism upon its environment.[69] Dodd for example has cogently demonstrated the infiltration of Jewish thought in the Hermetica, and his comment deserves attention: "The old question whether these heresies (in Colossians and the Pastorals) were of Jewish or pagan origin loses much of its point when we recall that Hellenistic Jewish thought and pagan thought of the *Poimandres* type were already drawing together".[70]

Philo himself offers a clear illustration of this convergence, although it is by no means certain how far he is to be considered as typical of the Judaism of the Dispersion. At many points, however, he seems to foreshadow the later Gnostic doctrines, and it would not be difficult to imagine a group of thinkers who went even further than he in accommodating Judaism to Hellenistic thought. Such a group, had we evidence for its existence, might well form a Jewish Gnosticism, and it may be that Philo gives a hint in his reference to those who neglect the letter of the law by reason of their insistence on the spirit.[71] This is obviously akin to the attitude of the Gnostic πνευματικοί, but this one reference is too slender a thread upon which to hang a theory.

The probability that the Essenes were affected by alien influences has long been recognised, and the evidence of recent discoveries seems now to make it certain.[72] This may involve some re-adjustment of our views of Judaism in the Hellenistic period, since it is clear that this sect considered itself particularly scrupulous in observance

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[68] Cf. the Preface to Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles*.

[69] Cf. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* 247: "It has been customary of late to emphasize the influence of Gentile thought upon Judaism, and that influence was unquestionably enormous. But it would not be safe to assume that where Hellenistic Judaism shows parallels with non-Jewish thought, the debt lies always and wholly upon one side".

[70] Ibid. 248 n.1.

[71] Mig. Ab. 16.

[72] Cf. Dupont-Sommer op. cit. Coppens however (*La Nouvelle Clio* 1954, 253) says "Il faut être circonspect en ce qui concerne le caractère syncrétiste de la secte. Il semble même qu'il faut le rester en ce qui concerne son caractère essénien".

of the law. Here again, as with Philo, it is not hard to conceive of others who went even further than the Essenes appear to have done.

One further point may be added: it is notorious that not all the Gnostic sects moved on the philosophic level of a Valentinus. Some of the systems are much more akin to magic, and the Jews in the Hellenistic world had a reputation as magicians. There however the warning already mentioned must be borne in mind. We have to consider the possibility of pagan borrowings from the sacred books of the Jews, probably with little understanding of their meaning.

Our knowledge of the Hellenistic world is at many points defective, We cannot say with certainty what were the methods by which the Mystery Religions were propagated, or what were the possibilities for men to gain acquaintance with the religious ideas of the other nations. We know of the early Christian mission, and in a general way of the itinerant philosophers and the religious charlatans like Alexander of Abounoteichus and Simon Magus. In the cosmopolitan Hellenistic cities there must have been ample scope for the development and spread of a movement such as Gnosticism.

So far as our present knowledge goes, however, Gnosticism in the strict sense appears first after the entrance of Christianity upon the stage of the wider world. The New Testament itself affords evidence of an incipient movement, which by the second century had grown into a world-religion and constituted a real danger to the Christian faith. The origins of this movement are obscure, but in so far as it is pre-Christian it seems to derive from Jewish speculation of a more or less unorthodox character. It is however suggested that this "pre-Christian" Gnosis, Jewish or pagan, would be more naturally classified not as Gnosticism but as pre-gnosis.

St. Andrews, St. Mary's College.